

Lenten Wednesday Reflection—Holy Moses #5
March 12, 2008: Exodus 19:9-20, Matthew 22:34-40

Count to Ten

Both in the texts and in the drama, you heard the Ten Commandments. How well do you remember them? One: you shall have no other gods. Two: you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Three: Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. Four: Honor your father and mother. Five: You shall not kill. Six: You shall not commit adultery. Seven: You shall not steal. Eight: You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Nine: You shall not covet your neighbor's house. Ten: You shall not covet your neighbor's spouse.

How'd you do? I have an unfair advantage over you because, you see, I heard the commandments recited every single Sunday as a kid growing up in the Christian Reformed Church! I knew the Commandments before I knew the Lord's Prayer.

Which raises the question: what are the commandments good for? A few weeks back, one of our confirmation students asked: are they supposed to be guidelines for living or are they supposed to make us feel guilty? The answer is, **yes**.

In point of fact, we hear the commandments in at least three ways. **In the first place, they protect us from ourselves.** During our trip to Colombia, we traveled a large section of road that was under construction: they were making a two lane road into four lanes. Posted alongside the temporary road were reduced speed signs: fifty kilometers per hour. The steep drop off between the edge of this road and the new road bed workers were laying was marked by yellow tape, like our police tape. "**Peligro,**" it said: **Danger.** A double yellow line divided the road into two lanes. Our driver skillfully steered the bus between the yellow tape on the one side and oncoming traffic on the other.

What it would be like if there were **no** signs? No speed limit, no lane markers, nothing to protect the workers? I hate to think of it.

Just so, God gives the Ten Commandments to protect us from ourselves. We're told to rest on the Sabbath because otherwise we are tempted to work all the time and because without worship, we easily forget about God. We're told not to commit adultery because adultery quickly leads to conflict and divorce. We're told not to bear false witness because one lie leads to another until we're in a big mess. We're told to value God above all because when we don't, everything else falls apart. The commandments are a firewall against trouble of every kind.

We also hear the commandments as an impossible demand. Imagine that the road narrows by several feet on both sides, so that there is no margin for error. One inch **this** way and the driver breaks through the police tape; one inch **that** way and she crosses the yellow line. Try as she might, she just can't "keep it between the lines."

This is what happens when Jesus teaches the Ten Commandments. He sees beyond rules to God's perfect **intent** for the world. You shall not steal refers not only to individuals shoplifting; it refers to nations having more than their share in a world of suffering. You shall not commit adultery means never desiring another, but only the one you are married to, **all** the time. You shall not bear false witness means putting the best construction on everything people say, even your enemies, **all** the time. Remembering the Sabbath means listening to every sermon with your whole heart and mind **all** the time. Who does that? Who **can** do that? Only Jesus. Which is the point of hearing the commandments this way. Jesus' perfection makes up for all of our failures and frees us from the tyranny of perfection. Try as we might, we will never live up to God's intent.

I think there is a third way of hearing the commandments, **as guideposts for love**. Some parts of the highway in Colombia **were** finished: two lanes in both directions, shoulders on each side. But I noticed something odd: there were no "do not pass" signs, no "pass with care" signs, no dotted lines anywhere! This does not mean that Colombian drivers never pass! In fact, they pass more than we do. They regard all lanes of traffic only as guideposts and think nothing of having three vehicles side by side in only two lanes! It's common to cross the center line to pass, forcing an oncoming car to slow down. And to ignore stop signs if no one is coming. Sounds chaotic, doesn't it? But it works surprisingly well! That's because Colombians don't drive very fast, for one thing. And because they are respectful of each other. When someone passes, he or she honks ever so slightly and the other car slows down.

In the same way, Jesus summarizes the law: "love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself." That's the bottom line. The Commandments guide us, but are not a straitjacket. Reflecting the love of Jesus may mean going beyond the commandments, even breaking them sometimes. Can you tell a lie to protect the life of someone? Of course! If you are a doctor on call, should you care for a patient on Sunday? Of course. Love is that which fulfills the commandments! And love is embodied in the cross!

It would certainly be wrong to think that these three ways of hearing the commandments are separate or that one graduates from one to the other to the other in the school of religion. No, we need **all** of them. First, to protect ourselves from ourselves. Second, to show us the perfect one who frees us from the tyranny of perfection. And third, to show love where to start. Amen.